The Comanches

He could run down and kill the buffalo on the open plains and afterwards carry it farther and save more of it than had been possible before.

It is difficult to overestimate the military value of the horse to the Comanche. It provided both the means and the incentive for more extended raids. Forays could be made more often and deeper into enemy territory, and the possibility of escaping safely with more plunder was greater with its use. It was primarily the horse that enabled the Comanches to extend their power southward, to beat the Spaniards and the Mexicans for more than a century, to make the Texas frontier unsafe for white settlement until they were restricted to a reservation, and to contend for a time successfully with the military forces of the United States from the Mexican border to north of the Arkansas River.

Horses constituted the most important type of property and the staple form of wealth. Because taking them under difficult conditions had a sociopsychological value, the acquisition of a large herd added greatly to the prestige of the owner. The owner of a large herd could make more munificent gifts to a prospective wife and members of her family and to other members of the tribe. Horses served also as an informal medium of exchange. They could be presented as gifts in reciprocity for services rendered and as fees to medicine men. When they were used in the settlement of controversies between individuals—as they generally were among the Comanches—they had legal as well as monetary significance.

Comanche esteem of horses knew no bounds. Each man had at least one favorite horse, although his personal string might run to dozens, or even hundreds, of animals. His favorite horse was kept picketed close to his tipi at night while the remuda grazed on the open plains. He tended it, petted it, and adored it. "Some men loved their horses more than they loved their wives," said Post Oak Jim. To this, others added, "Or child, or any other any human being." And in seeking legal settlements, whatever else the prosecuting man and his friends might demand of the offending culprit, they were sure to insist on the favorite horse.

In his own experience with a damage suit, Breaks Something had to deal with this problem.

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camp functioning properly. The tasks were varied and time-consuming, and no one woman could have taken care of all of them.

The warrior-husband was the killer of game, the procurer of buffalo meat, the Comanches' principal source of food. He had to have two sets of trained horses--one trained for war, the other for the killing of buffalo. In either pursuit, his life was largely dependent on the horse. He manufactured both his riding gear and his weapons, and he trained his own horses. His fighting was practically on a twelve-month basis, since, though the Comanches did not like winter fighting, most of the ambitious warriors made raiding expeditions into Old Mexico when the group went into winter camp.

The husband, therefore, could be of little or no help around the camp, and the labor had to be divided among the women. Usually one of the women was an expert horsewoman and had the responsibility of her husband's horse herd, which often numbered a hundred or more. When the fall hunt was on for the winter's supply of meat, the wives did the skinning and butchering. They dried the meat and made the pemmican. Also, they prepared and tanned the hides. After the tanning came the making of clothing. This included everything the family wore, both in summer and winter. Since there was neither needle nor thread, the holes in the leather were made with a stone awl or one made from bone, and sinew taken from along the backbone of a buffalo or deer was used for thread.

Other hides were converted into robes for bedding or into covers for the tepees. When camp was moved, tepees had to be taken down and fastened on travoises, like all the other camp gear, and then camp must be set up again at the new location. All of this was strictly woman's work.

Somewhere, sometime, during breathing spells from all these duties, the women bore babies, nursed them, and raised them to be good Comanches. And all this was in a society without a recognized medium of exchange, in which no one could hire anything done. The Comanches did, however, utilize slave labor. Successful warriors furnished captive women to their wives for helpers. These captive women were given the opportunity to trade their slave status for wifehood, and captive girls were carefully trained to become Comanche wives. Captive boys were trained as warriors to fill the vacancies in the warrior ranks. In addition to members of other tribes, Anglos, Spaniards, and Mexicans were abducted to be made slaves.

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When our store opened for business, we had everything to learn about merchandising, and so we had no customs or inhibitions to overcome. I believe this operated to our advantage, especially with the Indian business. Mother selected our dry goods, and her good taste resulted in our having an attractive array of bolts of calico and gingham. Having observed the Indian women's taste in colors and the way they trimmed their clothes, she bought boxes and boxes of braid to match the colors of the piece goods. This unusual display of dry goods undoubtedly did much to attract the Indian women to our store from the very start.

I soon learned the Comanche words and phrases I needed to wait on them. I had no dictionary—as far as I know, the Comanche words had never been listed and defined. My learning was pretty much catch-as-catch-can. I found I could go a long way with the expression *Osh-a-him.* This can be translated as "What is the Comanche word for this?" or "What is this?" or "Who is that man?" or "Whose horse is this?" or "What is that man's name?" and so on and on and on, by inflection of the voice, pointing, and the use of signs.

Boylike, I was much amused at the women's way of shopping. When a family came into the store to trade, one wife would come to the grocery counter and start buying. She knew exactly what she wanted and the amount she wanted. No matter if she had been to Carlisle, if she wanted fifty cents' worth of sugar she said, "*Pina*—four bits." When I had weighed out the sugar, she paid for it and then asked for the next article, always by its Indian name and in amounts divisible by a bit, or 12½ cents. Money to the Comanches was two bits, four bits, six bits, dollar, dollar two bits, etc. Buying in this fashion would continue until all the first wife's wants were satisfied. Then she would place her purchases in a clean flour sack she had brought along for the purpose, and would rejoin the wife group.

Now a second wife would come to the counter, and in the majority of cases would buy exactly what the first wife had bought—and in identical amounts. Then it was wife number three's turn. The only variation would come when they bought the sweets for the children. Each wife bought for her own children, generally some variety of cookies that we kept on display, under glass to protect them from dirt and flies. Usually the older children had their own money and made their own purchases.